



2023 ANNUAL REPORT

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Foreword

- We live in very difficult times for children around the world. In his 2024 Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict, covering 2023, the UN Secretary-General noted that there was a “shocking” 21% increase in grave violations when compared to 2022, adding that the number of instances of killing and maiming increased by 35%. Leading child protection organizations have documented that 468 million children live in countries affected by armed conflict. In 2023 alone, the UN verified over 30,000 grave violations against children. There has never been the same level of witness to violations committed against children in war. This dire reality raises significant concerns about what the best strategies are to increase the parties’ compliance and restraint in war and improve the situation of children and their access to essential services.

In a period marked by an alarming rise in violations of international law by States and non-State armed groups, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict has remained steadfast in its efforts to advance the UN’s Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) agenda. As a leading voice in this arena, Watchlist’s work has helped policymakers and other key stakeholders in their efforts to better protect children in war. This report demonstrates the importance of this work, and how critical this effort is. In 2023, Watchlist was able to provide timely information on the situation of children in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in Gaza and the West Bank, and in Ukraine.

It also published a policy brief on abduction and deportation of children in armed conflict. The steps undertaken by Watchlist in 2023 were only possible because of the commitment of its team, of Watchlist's network of human rights and humanitarian organizations, and the support of its partners and allies.

As this report shows, Watchlist's efforts are crucial to safeguard children's rights, uphold the integrity of the CAAC agenda, and bring about lasting policy changes to protect children trapped in conflicts. On behalf of Watchlist and its members, we express our gratitude to our partners and donors for their unwavering support in promoting and achieving these goals. As you read and explore this report and Watchlist's activities and achievements, we hope you will continue to support its mission. We also hope that next year will be better for children's rights.

FAITH NIMINEH
*Co-Chair,
Watchlist Advisory Board
Representing ChildFund Alliance*

ROCCO BLUME
*Co-Chair,
Watchlist Advisory Board
Representing War Child Alliance*

EZEQUIEL HEFFES
*Director, Watchlist on Children
and Armed Conflict*



Advocacy

In 2023, Watchlist actively advanced the UN's Children and Armed Conflict Agenda, striving to safeguard and uphold existing protection frameworks and promote accountability for children's rights.

Implementing the UN's Children and Armed Conflict Agenda

In February 2023, Watchlist convened its ninth annual policy workshop on children and armed conflict. Organized in partnership with Fordham University's Institute for International Humanitarian Affairs (IIHA) in New York, the event brought together representatives from UN Security Council Member States, non-Council Member States, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, UNICEF, academia, and civil society to discuss priorities for the UN's CAAC agenda in 2023. The workshop consisted of four working sessions dedicated to (1) supporting the implementation of the CAAC agenda through the Security Council Working Group on CAAC and the Group of Friends of CAAC, (2) implementing Security Council Working Group conclusions on CAAC, (3) maintaining child protection capacity in UN mission transitions, and (4) protecting children with disabilities in armed conflict.

In April 2023, a summary document highlighting the key messages and recommendations from the workshop was issued as an official UN Security Council document ([S/2023/234](#)) at the request of the Permanent Mission of Malta to the UN.

In 2023, Watchlist also advocated for the protection of children in armed conflict around the world through its Children and Armed Conflict Monthly Updates. These updates provided recommendations for policymakers to mainstream child protection concerns into action by the UN Security Council, as well as for country-specific conclusions of the Security Council Working Group-CAAC (SCWG-CAAC). These targeted recommendations were substantially reflected in UN Security Council resolutions related to Central African Republic ([S/RES/2709](#)), the Democratic Republic of Congo ([S/RES/2717](#)), Somalia ([S/RES/2705](#)), and South Sudan ([S/RES/2677](#)).

Following the October 7 attacks, Watchlist engaged with Member States around child-specific and CAAC language on several draft resolution texts on Israel/OPT. Moreover, Watchlist conducted timely advocacy meetings with UN Security Council members to discuss country-specific CAAC concerns and follow up on recommendations included in Watchlist's CAAC Monthly Updates and other documents. This included meeting with members of the SCWG-CAAC and sharing targeted recommendations for the Working Group's country-specific conclusion negotiations, which were largely reflected in the Working Group's conclusions on [South Sudan](#), [Nigeria](#), and [Mali](#), all of which were adopted in 2023. Watchlist continued the practice of holding biannual NGO roundtables with members of the SCWG-CAAC, co-hosting these exchanges alongside the Working Group Chair Malta.

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I remain deeply grateful to the commitment of Watchlist towards the CAAC agenda and for their support to Malta in our term as Chair of the CAAC Working Group. Their guidance has been truly invaluable, and their work is more important than ever.

– H.E. Ambassador Vanessa Frazier,
Permanent Mission of Malta
to the United Nations

In June 2023, Watchlist published its annual “[Special Bulletin](#)” with recommendations for Member States ahead of the Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict. The brief recommends that the Security Council and other UN Member States strongly reiterate support for the UN's CAAC agenda and call for increased compliance with international law and child protection norms; strengthen the effective use of existing mechanisms and tools to monitor, report, and respond to grave violations; and redouble efforts to prevent grave violations against children and protect their rights in war. In addition to broadly disseminating the two-page brief, Watchlist presented the bulletin at an NGO briefing with the SCWG-CAAC and at a meeting of the Group of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict in New York, as well as in a series of bilateral advocacy meetings with Member States. These recommendations were reflected in [many](#) of the 74 interventions during the July 2023 Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict.

In October 2023, Watchlist [released](#) a statement on the events in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, where it condemned in the strongest terms all violations and abuses of international law committed against civilians, in particular children. It also called on all parties to uphold their obligations under this legal framework and emphasized the imperative to protect children. It also called on the UN Secretary-General to list Israeli government forces and Palestinian armed groups, as appropriate, in the annexes of his next annual report on children and armed conflict, based on UN-verified grave violations against children.

Promoting Accountability for Grave Violations through a Credible, Accurate List of Perpetrators

The listing and delisting of perpetrators in the Secretary-General's annual CAAC reports represents one of the most influential and powerful tools for promoting accountability for grave violations committed against

children in armed conflict. In 2023, Watchlist worked closely with members of its civil society network, UN offices, and other key stakeholders to highlight grave violations against children in conflict and other situations of concern, and build support for the objective and evidence-based listing of those parties to conflict who perpetrate grave violations of child rights in the Secretary-General's annual CAAC reports.

In April 2023, Watchlist published its seventh annual policy note, *"A Credible List": Recommendations for the Secretary-General's 2023 Annual Report on Children in Armed Conflict*, which made recommendations to the Secretary-General on listings for the 2023 annual report on children and armed conflict. The 25-page policy note provided information on grave violations committed against children in 12 countries in 2022. Drawing on UN-verified information and other credible accounts, the report recommended that 19 parties in 12 countries be added to the annexes of the 2023 annual report, listed for additional violations, or investigated further with a view toward possible listing. Watchlist also led a joint advocacy effort to publish an [open letter](#) to UN Secretary-General António Guterres calling for a complete and evidence-based list of perpetrators in his annual report on children's and armed conflict. Including Watchlist, 18 NGOs joined the collective effort, published in May. The letter also called on the Secretary-General to ensure that parties are only delisted in accordance with the criteria set out in the [2010 Secretary-General's annual CAAC report](#). In the document, the organizations reiterated their disappointment with the significant disparities between evidence presented in the 2020 and 2021 annual reports and the parties listed in its annexes for committing grave violations against children, as this serves to limit the promotion of accountability. The open letter also called upon the Secretary-General to ensure that situations where grave violations against children are occurring are swiftly brought to the attention of the Security Council by including them as "situations of concern," which would help to expand the available tools to protect children affected by armed conflict in these contexts.



These efforts contributed to a more credible and evidence-based list in the Secretary-General's 2023 annual report on CAAC. The Secretary-General added Russian armed forces and affiliated groups to his 'list of shame' for killing and maiming children and attacks on schools and hospitals. The Secretary-General also listed the non-State armed group *Mouvement du 23 mars* (M23), from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for killing and maiming children, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks against schools and hospitals, and abduction, the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS) for killing and maiming in Burkina Faso, and the Tatmadaw Kyi, now listed as the Myanmar Armed Forces, for attacks on schools and hospitals and abduction of children. In his 2023 report, the Secretary-General also announced that Haiti and Niger would be designated as 'situations of concern' with immediate effect, given the gravity and number of violations against children.



Research

- In 2023, Watchlist undertook research on contemporary issues facing children in armed conflict, including abduction and deportation, and disseminated its research to support policymakers to address these concerns.

In June 2023, Watchlist published a [policy brief](#) focused on abduction and deportation of children in armed conflict. The document provides a glossary of relevant legal terms and presents clear and succinct analysis of terms by referencing the legal basis under international law, jurisprudence, and interpretative work. This policy brief aims to enhance legal understanding on child protection in armed conflict among domestic and international policymakers, field practitioners, civil society organizations and the media. This policy brief forms part of a new Children and Armed Conflict Series, a publication series jointly developed by Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict and the Generating Respect Hub at the University of York's (UK) Centre for Applied Human Rights.

In addition to conducting research, Watchlist also continued to incorporate the findings and recommendations of its previously published the

Denial of Humanitarian Access (DHA) [policy note](#) into monthly CAAC updates, as well as engagement on conclusions of the Security Council Working Group on CAAC. This policy note, published in June 2022, examines the international legal framework on DHA as it applies to children; the impact of counterterrorism measures, sanctions regimes, and donor conditionality clauses affecting humanitarian access for children; the various forms of denial of humanitarian access and their consequences on children, including emerging obstacles such as the COVID-19 pandemic; the challenges of monitoring and reporting on the denial of humanitarian access in the context of the UN's CAAC mandate; and the potential risks and opportunities of making the denial of humanitarian access a trigger for listing perpetrators in the Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict.



Partnerships

- Since its inception, Watchlist has worked in partnership with local and international civil society organizations in conflict-affected countries. It is through this collaboration that Watchlist is better able to advocate for children living in situations of armed conflict, while also supporting grassroots efforts to monitor, report, and respond to grave violations against children.

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Watchlist’s dedication to advancing the UN Children and Armed Conflict agenda is invaluable and truly commendable. Watchlist has been a great partner for the GCR2P and we look forward to continuing collaborating towards a better world for children affected by armed conflicts.

– Savita Pawnday, Executive Director
Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect

Joint Advocacy Initiatives

In 2023, Watchlist continued to work with our partners in civil society, academia, UN offices and agencies, UN Member States, and other organizations to strengthen the protection of children living in war. Through a number of interactive events, Watchlist worked collaboratively to address child protection concerns in particular conflict situations – in particular, the Ukraine and Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory – as well as to highlight specific topics related to CAAC, such as the protection of education and healthcare, children with disabilities, recruitment and use of children, detention of children, and accountability.

In March, Watchlist's Director moderated an event hosted by the EU Delegation and Geneva Call on protecting civilians in armed conflict. On April 28, Watchlist participated in an Arria Meeting on abduction of children, co-organized by the United States, France, Albania and co-sponsored by Ukraine. During this event, Watchlist advocated to strengthen the level of compliance with international law by parties to armed conflict; to support monitoring and reporting mechanisms to ensure that cases of abduction and deportation are identified and addressed; and to ensure that children who were victims of abduction and deportation, and have returned to their communities, have access to appropriate support and services.

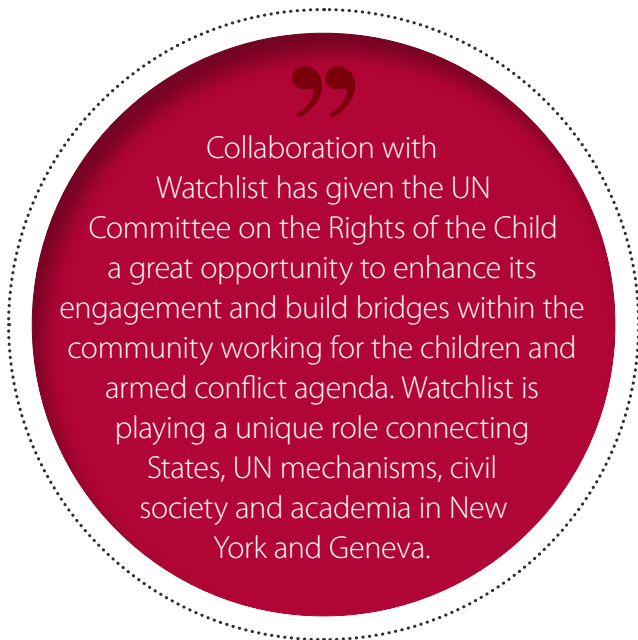
In May, Watchlist hosted a side event to the UN's 2023 Protection of Civilians (PoC) Week entitled "Education in Armed Conflict: Protection, Prevention, and Access." The event was co-organized by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack and the Permanent Missions of Malta, Luxembourg, and Japan. Additional cosponsors include: The Permanent Missions of Colombia, France, Norway, the Philippines, and Switzerland, as well as the European Union, ChildFund Alliance, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Education Cannot Wait, Geneva Call, the OSRSG-CAAC, Plan International, Save the Children, UNESCO, and UNICEF. The event was attended by over 70 participants. Watchlist also co-sponsored two additional side events on [Protecting Children with Disabilities in Armed Conflict: Reviewing Gaps and Achievements Four Years After UNSC 2475 \(2019\)](#); and [Connecting the Local to the Global: Breaking down Silos and Strengthening Action on Attacks on Healthcare](#).

In June, Watchlist participated in the Oslo Conference on Children and Armed Conflict organized by Norway, ICRC, UNICEF, and Save the Children, in partnership with the OSRSG-CAAC, OCHA, and the African Union. Watchlist spoke on the panel session on preventing recruitment and use and ensuring adequate reintegration.

In September, Watchlist spoke at the High-Level side event organized at the margins of the UN General Assembly during the High-Level Week entitled "Breaking Chains, Building Futures: Ending the Detention of Children in Armed Conflict", advocating for parties to armed conflict to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. Also, during High-Level Week, Watchlist, Geneva Call, and the Permanent Mission of Malta organized a CAAC dinner for Member States, including current and incoming elected members of the Security Council, as well as non-Council members supportive of the CAAC agenda.

In October, Watchlist (with Switzerland, Uruguay, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Child Rights Connect) co-organized a high-level [panel](#) entitled "Enhancing cooperation between New York and Geneva for the protection of Children in Armed Conflict and from other Forms of Violence", in the context of the [Geneva Human Rights Platform 2023 Annual Conference in New York](#). Also in October, Watchlist co-organized a [webinar](#) with the American Red Cross in which Watchlist presented an introduction to the CAAC agenda and engaged in an interactive dialogue with participants.

In November, Watchlist (with the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, UNESCO, and the Permanent Missions of Colombia, Malta, Nigeria, Norway, and Switzerland) organized an event to commemorate the second anniversary of Security Council Resolution 2601 (2021). Watchlist spoke to the role of Member States in the SCWG-CAAC, in the broader work of the UN, and in their national capacities to support implementation of the resolution. The event is available to view in its entirety on [UN WebTV](#).



**– Mikiko Otani
Member and Former Chair, UN Committee
on the Rights of the Child**

During the week of November 27th, Watchlist intervened at the 5th Romeo Dallaire Institute International Symposium in Kigali, themed “Placing Children at the Heart of Peace and Security: From Vision to Action”. In December, Watchlist also participated in a workshop organized by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack in Saly, Senegal, on the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration and Guidelines in West and Central Africa. Also in December, Watchlist co-sponsored a Side Event to the ICC 22nd Assembly of State Parties entitled “Accountability for Crimes Against Children: Challenges and Opportunities from a Gender Perspective”, organized by Legal Action Worldwide (LAW).

Institutional Learning and Advocacy

Throughout the year, Watchlist worked with international and local civil society partners to exchange lessons learned and best practices in an effort to further mainstream child protection concerns and educate broader policy audiences on CAAC.

In 2023, Watchlist engaged in social media campaigns to advance the CAAC agenda. For example, in February 2023, Watchlist designed and facilitated a social media campaign for Red Hand Day, titled #RaiseYourRed, to educate the broader public about the recruitment and use of child soldiers and to call on policymakers to take action to end and prevent this grave violation of children’s rights. The campaign served as a call to unite the global community to end the recruitment and use of children. The campaign focused on the importance of Red Hand Day, protection, prevention, and accountability. It was launched via Twitter and Facebook on February 12 (Red Hand Day). Watchlist network members engaged in the #RaiseYourRed campaign, which successfully spread awareness about the progress made in protecting children in war and the work that remains.

Watchlist also continued to provide a training tool for Security Council members, CAAC experts, and other stakeholders through its innovative [smartphone application](#). The CAAC application, originally launched in 2013 and substantially updated in 2016 and again in 2020 and 2023, serves as a comprehensive tool with easy-to-access information on CAAC-related topics. Watchlist updated the app with information from the Secretary-General’s 2023 annual report on children and armed conflict.



Organizational Update

As a global network of human rights and humanitarian organizations, Watchlist strives to end and prevent grave violations against children in war.

An Advisory Board comprised of five distinguished NGOs in the child rights field continued to provide guidance and supervision to support Watchlist in achieving its programmatic goals. The Advisory Board – ChildFund Alliance, Human Rights Watch, Save the Children, War Child, and World Vision International – shares responsibility for overseeing Watchlist’s staff, programs, fundraising, and finances.

Watchlist’s network is also fueled by eleven Associate Members who share a wealth of knowledge and expertise on children’s rights. Two organizations joined Watchlist as associate members in 2023: StreetChild and Legal Action Worldwide.

Watchlist is immensely grateful for the support of several donors, especially for the funding it received in 2023 from the Governments of Australia, Luxembourg, and Switzerland, as well as sub-grants from Save the Children Norway and War Child UK. Watchlist also expresses its heartfelt thanks to individual donors who continue to value its mission and contribute financial support.

The united support of our partners, funders, and network members, together with the generosity of individual donors, allows Watchlist to strive towards a world where all children are protected, and their rights are fully realized.

Financials

[Financial information will be added in due course]

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Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict
122 East 42nd Street, Suite 451
New York, NY 10168
Email: watchlist@watchlist.org
Access reports at: www.watchlist.org
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